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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to assist Australian employers in helping female apprentices in nontraditional trades overcome barriers to their successful completion of training. The first part deals with the following difficulties experienced by female apprentices: isolation, restrictions on the breadth of training, women's need to "prove" themselves, practical jokes, offensive physical environments, and sexual harassment. The second half of the guide describes strategies for supporting female apprentices: induction courses for apprentices, training and development for supervisors and coworkers, off-the-job training centers, industry support structures, appointment of support persons or mentors, support from other women, consultation with unions, adoption of a sexual harassment policy, design of equipment, and liaisons with Technical and Further Education (TAFE). (MN)

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Affirmative Action Issues Paper No. 1

Strategies for Employers for Supporting Female Apprentices in Non-Traditional Trades

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Affirmative Action Resource Unit
Office of the Status of Women
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

January 1985

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STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYERS FOR SUPPORTING FEMALE

APPRENTICES IN NON-TRADITIONAL TRADES

Affirmative Action Resource Unit
Office of the Status of Women
Department of the Prime Minister
and Cabinet

January 1985

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Introduction

Women's participation in the Australian labour market is characterised by an extremely high rate of occupational and industrial segregation (Policy Discussion Paper, Affirmative Action for Women, 1984). This continuing sex segregation perpetuates disadvantages for women, both in their access to the labour market and in the quality of employment that is available to them.

Women are concentrated in a narrow range of occupations with two thirds of female workers employed in clerical, sales and service occupations. Industry restructuring has resulted in a decline in the number of jobs in clerical and sales occupations and within these, and other occupations, women are usually employed in low skilled, low status jobs. Such jobs often require neither training nor provide opportunities for promotion or career development.

In addition, women in Australia earn considerably less than men, even though equal pay principles have applied since 1975. An examination of earnings shows that industries in which women predominate have the lowest average weekly earnings for all employees compared with some male-dominated industries which have average weekly earnings well above the mean (Women's Bureau 'Gender Wage Differentials in Australia', 1983). ABS statistics show that in August 1983, women were earning 68% of average male earnings in the finance industry and 79% in the community services industry.

To increase the status of women in the labour force, it is necessary to remove any barriers that prevent women from competing for jobs in a wider range of occupations and to diversify the range of skills available to them. It is necessary, therefore, for women to have access to skills training in traditionally-male occupations. It is particularly important that women have the opportunity to benefit from apprenticeship training.

State Training Commission statistics suggest that the number of female apprentices has hardly increased over the last five years. In 1983, approximately 11,900 women were training as apprentices in Australia. They comprised approximately 8.8 percent of all apprentices in training in this country. However, the proportion of females taking up positions in trades other than hairdressing was only about 2 percent of all apprenticeships.

Because of the skills training and employment opportunities offered through apprenticeships, various schemes have been established to try to encourage young women to take up apprenticeships in non-traditional trades. Such schemes include:

- Girls Apprenticeship and Technical Scheme operating from TAFE colleges in Victoria
- Apprenticeship Program for Girls in NSW
- promotional efforts in schools by Commonwealth and State Governments
- funds for trade based pre-employment training in TAFE for up to 500 women including special 10 weeks preparatory training
- CRAFT Special Additional Employment Incentive for Female Apprentices which provided employers with financial incentives for each additional female apprentice in employment on 30 June 1984 compared to 30 June 1983.

Nonetheless these schemes can only provide encouragement to young women to consider employment in non-traditional trades. They cannot provide support structures for all female apprentices once they actually start on the job. Experience suggests that when women move into occupations or industries traditionally employing only men, they encounter a number of difficulties. Support structures, to anticipate, prevent, or deal with, any such difficulties, are a necessary accompaniment to the initial intakes of women into an all-male environment.

Difficulties Experienced by Female Apprentices

Experience suggests that while young women can do well in non-traditional jobs, there are some difficulties which may arise as a result of being a woman in a male-dominated environment. Most of these difficulties stem from ingrained attitudes on the part of male co-workers of what is 'women's work' and where women should be working. The notion of 'women's work' can also colour men's views of what women are capable of doing, specifically in relation to heavy or dirty work and the sort of women who choose to do these jobs. Male employees may also have difficulty in accepting that women work for the same reasons as men - for personal satisfaction and economic independence - and therefore choose jobs that satisfy these requirements.

It is perhaps understandable for men accustomed to working in male-only occupations to be reluctant and sceptical about the introduction of women into their working environment. It should be expected that some might even question the sincerity and commitment of women moving in to what they may see as being men's jobs, and to question whether such women have the technical or mechanical competence, the physical strength and the ability to do these jobs.

Many of the problems female apprentices face with supervisors and co-workers relate to the prejudices outlined above, and their need to demonstrate their competence as a woman to do the job. Some of these problems can be summed up by the comment of a female motor mechanic referring to her co-workers:

> Some of them can be amazing at times but most of this is due to their lack of understanding about my ideas of what a female should and should not be able to do. Most of them cannot understand that I expect to do the same work as the boys, and be treated with the same amount of respect. Some of them fussed and worried about me, and I missed out on learning some of the vital aspects of the trade as a result. I am only now beginning to catch up on those areas, since I made a firm stand and stated that I was quite willing and able to attempt anything which was asked of me.
>
> (Women at Work 1983, Vol 4)

The most common difficulties experienced by female apprentices in non-traditional trades are outlined below.

1. Isolation

A feeling of isolation is the most frequently reported difficulty encountered by women moving into traditionally male work areas.

This isolation from other women can be aggravated by a lack of understanding, acceptance or even hostility, on the part of male co-workers. These reactions sometimes arise because men may feel uncomfortable about working with a women for the first time. Some female apprentices have experienced exclusion from conversation and information. For example, women report being excluded from sitting and talking with male co-workers during meal breaks. Their exclusion from other forms of social interaction at the workplace and at work related activities, and lack of response to their approaches to co-workers or supervisers for information or advice, can create an extremely stressful learning and working environment. It also increases the feeling of loneliness often reported by young women who are working for the first time in a totally male environment.

2. Restrictions on Breadth of Training

Apprenticeship training relies heavily on on-the-job experience and performance. Such a system means apprentices depend on their supervisors and co-workers to draw on their experience and guidance. Poor relations with other workers can result in the withholding of information and hence missed training opportunities.

Whilst it is recognised that apprentices do a lot of routine work, some women have reported a tendency to allocate more of the mundane duties and routine work to female apprentices, while jobs requiring a broader application of trade skills are allocated to male apprentices. For example one female apprentice said: "Basically they said I was not up to standard. I felt this was so because I was always given the easy garbage jobs and never any new or difficult jobs." (Interview conducted by ACTU Working Women's Centre).

3. Having to 'Prove' Themselves

It is appreciated that all new apprentices go through a period of being 'tested' and having to prove their commitment and competence and thereby become accepted into the new workplace. However, experience indicates that female apprentices often have to work harder, for longer periods, to 'prove' themselves to be as competent as male apprentices. Some women have reported feeling pressure to over-perform in order to gain acceptance. Female apprentices have reported being unnecessarily singled out during practical demonstrations to show that they can do the work. This singling out can leave them with the feeling that everyone is waiting for them to fail. This can lead to an increased feeling of isolation from the rest of the group.

4. Practical Jokes

Once again whilst it is accepted that 'pranks' are common in the early stages of apprenticeships, it appears that women are often subjected to a continuous stream of more serious and derogatory jokes than those applied to first year male apprentices. Such 'jokes' vary from name calling to vandalising clothes or tools. One woman reported incidents of male co-workers scraping their initials over her completed work, nailing her boots to the floor, sticking sign tags to the back of her jumper, and painting her boots and overalls pink.

5. Offensive Physical Environment

In male-dominated environments there is sometimes a preponderance of posters and magazines of naked women which, by depicting women merely as sexual objects, constantly reinforces stereotyped roles for women and can affect their acceptance as workers with individual abilities and skills. Such 'pin-ups' of naked women can make a work environment very uncomfortable and unwelcoming for a young woman who may already feel isolated.

6. Sexual Harassment

Often antagonism to women entering a previously all-male environment will take the form of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a general term covering unwelcome sexual behaviour. Forms of sexual harassment experienced by female apprentices have included: continual reference to their sex life, sexuality or physical appearance;

suggestive remarks and forms of verbal abuse such as calling the women by a derogatory sexual term rather than by their given name; demands for sexual favours; and touching and patting. Each incident in itself may be relatively minor but if continued over a prolonged period can be very wearing and stressful. If an apprentice has reasonable belief that by rejecting these unwelcome advances she would be, or is, disadvantaged in connection with her employment, such behaviour may be discrimination involving sexual harassment under the Sex Discrimination Act 1984.

Strategies for Supporting Female Apprentices

There has been a high turnover of female apprentices in some trades largely due to these difficulties. Any action that employers can take to prevent these difficulties from arising can help to reduce this attrition rate.

There are several strategies employers can use to support female apprentices in non-traditional trades, and to prepare the existing work-force for the arrival of women in the workplace.

1. Induction Courses for Apprentices

As a means of explaining to both male and female apprentices what is expected of them as apprentices within the organisation, a short induction course could be useful. Such a course could be used to outline the nature of their jobs, the role of other employees in the organisation in relation to the apprentices, the role of Industry Training Commission Apprentice Supervisors, the function of unions and the names of union delegates, and most importantly the type of behaviour that is expected of them and behaviour that will not be tolerated (eg, serious or offensive pranks, sexual harassment, and any other behaviour inappropriate to the work place).

2. Training and Development for Supervisors and Co-Workers

Training and development for supervisors and co-workers is a particularly important strategy. Ideally, a training and development seminar should be undertaken before female apprentices commence in the workplace so workers can be advised that female apprentices are about to be employed. This approach can attempt to elicit, from open discussion, any doubts or reservations the men may have about female apprentices working with them.

Most of the difficulties facing female apprentices result from traditional prejudices and negative attitudes on the part of male workers, often arising from lack of experience of working with women. A training course can help these workers confront commonly held myths about women's capabilities, and increase their sensitivity to the problems often experienced by female apprentices. It can also assist male workers become more comfortable with the idea of working with women.

Employees need to be encouraged to treat females as they would treat other co-workers, particularly to:

- establish friendly and respectful working relationships which includes them in all workplace activities
- be wary of being over protective
- give them a fair chance of learning the trade by providing assistance where appropriate
- evaluate their performances fairly and not single them out for special treatment or expect them to 'prove' themselves more than male apprentices.

A staff development program can be used to dispel myths about the capabilities of women to do work traditionally done by men. The following are examples of some common myths and suggested responses which may be useful:

- Common myth

  Women can't do heavy work.

  Possible response

  Some traditional 'women's work' eg nursing, involves lifting heavy weights. Strength is an individual matter: some young men are fit and strong, others are not. It is the same with young women. If a young woman is fit and strong enough to cope with the work then she should be given the opportunity to get on with the job. All employees should be encouraged to use lifting equipment to reduce the incidence of strain injuries.

- Common myth

  Women don't want to do dirty work.

  Possible response

  If a job is interesting and the wages and prospects are good then men and women will put up with small drawbacks such as doing dirty work. Women already work in very 'dirty' jobs such as process work, horticulture and nursing, and have 'dirty' hobbies such as gardening. (Not to mention such traditional 'women's work' as washing nappies.) It depends on the woman's attitude, not her sex. If she applies for a job obviously she wants it.

- Common myth

  Women in the workshop or on the site will distract the men and disrupt work.

  Possible response

  Women in the workshop or on the site are there to work like anyone else. Employers of female apprentices find that once other workers realise this everyone settles down and works together without disruption. Men and women already work along side one another in many occupations, eg in shops, offices and factories.

- Common myth

  Women should not take jobs from men; they should be at home looking after the children.

  Possible response

  Young women have as great a need to work as young men, but suffer from much higher unemployment rates as they are frequently competing for a narrower range of jobs than boys and thus have more restricted employment opportunities. In the 1980s, many married women find they have to work for economic reasons to increase family income. Increasing numbers of women are becoming the sole breadwinner for their families because of death, divorce or the unemployment of their spouse and thus are as much in need of a decent income as are male breadwinners. In addition, women are able to participate more fully in the labour force because of the decline in family size and diminished family responsibilities. Nor should it be forgotten that the majority of women want to work.

3. Off-the-Job Training Centres

Many large organisations have established off-the-job training centres which train as many as 500 apprentices in varying trades for up to 12 months. The training provided for apprentices within an industry does not appear to vary significantly from employer to employer. Variation and specialisation lies in the different emphasis in the training offered across industry groups. Because of a reduction in their own apprentice numbers, some organisations with training centres offer 'host' training to other organisations within the same industry. It appears that off-the-job training, at

present, is most appropriate for industries which have a requirement for metal and electrical apprentices.

Off-the-job training would appear to hold many advantages for female apprentices. These include:

- an opportunity to become familiar with, and confident in using tools, techniques, etc before working on the shopfloor
- familiarisation with a non-traditional workplace and working with male peers before entering a 'real' work environment
- avoiding isolation, particularly in the early period of training, by providing an opportunity to establish working relationships with other apprentices
- a gradual introduction for the remaining workforce to the idea of female apprentices together with a gradual opportunity to get to know them before they move to the shopfloor.

4. Industry Support Structures

Industry structures could be established to provide support to female apprentices. Aspects of such structures could include:

- providing women in non-traditional occupations with the opportunity to contact women in similar situations in other organisations in their vicinity
- providing joint induction courses for new apprentices with time allotted for discussion amongst the female apprentices
- organisations without training centres making use of 'host' training centres to increase the number of female apprentices training together - this could be particularly useful for organisations employing only one female apprentice.

5. Appointment of Support Person or Mentor

It might be useful, in the early stages of an apprenticeship, to appoint a support person or mentor from amongst a female apprentice's co-workers to whom she knows she can turn for advice or information or when problems arise. An older female apprentice, another woman working in a non-traditional area, or a supportive

trained worker from the same trade would be suitable for such a role. This person can ensure that the female apprentice has the same opportunities as other apprentices and is accepted by other employees, without actually supervising her.

6. Support from Other Women

Another strategy to reduce isolation is to employ several females in each apprentice intake. It is often easier for male employees to accept male apprentices into their company because of common interests, eg football. Having several female apprentices can reduce loneliness by ensuring companionship, particularly if they feel excluded by male topics of conversation. Over time such barriers between males and females will become less apparent especially as common interests develop from working together.

7. Consultation with Unions

The implementation of an affirmative action program is likely to be more successful if unions are able to assist with its development. Unions can assist by indicating their support for the principles behind the program and by informing their members of the progress of the programs. Therefore it would be useful if management consulted with unions, when employing female apprentices, for additional assistance in easing their acceptance into an all-male environment.

Unions can play a supportive role by putting young women in touch with other women in their trade. The ACTU Working Women's Centre maintains a Register of Women in Non-Traditional Occupations. Unions can also assist in reducing isolation experienced by female apprentices through articles in union newsletters allaying doubts among male members regarding women entering trades.

8. Adoption of Sexual Harassment Policy

The adoption of a sexual harassment policy and grievance procedures will assist with complaints. The promotion of such a policy will assist in avoiding sexual harassment by ensuring that employees are aware that proper standards of conduct are expected and that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. Some employers have developed policy and grievance guidelines in conjunction with unions, eg Victorian State Electricity Commission. The NSW Anti-Discrimination Board publishes Guidelines for Employers on Eliminating Sexual Harassment.

The appointment of a contact officer, preferably a woman, can assist in resolving complaints.

9. Design of Equipment

Female apprentices sometimes have difficulty with equipment that has been designed for men. In particular, protective clothing can be too large and work benches too high. Adjustable equipment can make the job a lot easier and reduce safety hazards for both male and female apprentices. Smaller sized equipment may need to be introduced as women are moving into the trades for health and safety reasons, eg protective footwear.

10. Liaison with TAFE

The State Departments of Technical and Further Education can assist employers when problems arise in the training of apprentices. TAFE should also be consulted if female apprentices experience harassment from other apprentices or teachers while attending TAFE courses.

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